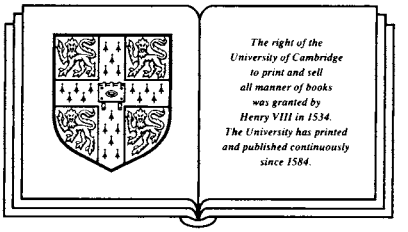
PATRONAGE AND POLITICS IN THE USSR

JOHN P. WILLERTON
Assistant Professor of Political Science
University of Arizona



CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge
New York Port Chester
Melbourne Sydney

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Victoria 3166, Australia

First published 1992

Printed in Great Britain at
the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this book is available at the British Library

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

Willerton, John P.
Patronage and politics in the USSR/John P. Willerton.
p. cm. – (Soviet and East European studies: 82)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0 521 39288 8 (hardback)
1. Patronage, Political – Soviet Union – Case studies.
2. Executives – Soviet Union – Case studies. 3. Soviet Union –
Politics and government – 1917 – Case studies. 4. Lithuania –
Politics and government – 1945 – Case studies. 5. Azerbaijan
S.S.R. – Politics and government – Case studies. I. Title.
II. Series.
JN6549.E9W55 1992
324.2'04 – dc20 91–57 CIP

ISBN 0 521 39288 8 hardback

GE

Contents

Tables

Introduction

Patron–client relations have played an important role in the recruitment, mobility, and behavior of politicians throughout the over seven decades of Soviet power. Operating in a highly centralized institutional setting and guided by a set of norms that reflected the hierarchical nature of political relations, Soviet officials have relied upon clientelistic ties to advance their interests in an essentially insecure political environment. These informal networks of interconnected careers have been critical to the formation of governing coalitions, bridging individual, institutional, sectoral, and regional interests. They have been a major device for increasing and maintaining politicians' power and authority.

However, among the approaches to the study of the Soviet political elite and policy making, patronage has remained an enigmatic and confounding factor. Our limited knowledge about clientelistic norms has stemmed in part from a paucity of information regarding established rules and practices of Soviet elite mobility and regime formation. The lack of extensive biographical and attitudinal data for the national political elite, along with the near absence of systematic data for subnational officials, has obscured the identification of such relationships and their norms. These extra-legal informal political associations are, by their very nature, difficult to identify. The governing ethos of the Soviet Union has decried and denied them. Given these dilemmas, the scholarly work that has been done on patronage, elite mobility, and regime formation has generally been qualitative, time and context-specific, and often speculative. The policy-making implications of these ties and networks have remained essentially unexplored.

The traditional Soviet political system has been hierarchical and highly centralized. There have been no alternative sources of power outside the unified set of party and government hierarchies. Patron-

age and other manifestations of a *second polity* have been decisive in this system, providing the necessary slack for it to operate, albeit incrementally. Patronage has served as an adhesive binding individuals and groups together, bridging various organized interests. Coalitions of protégés who worked and ascended the system together, supplemented with relative newcomers and allies whose policy and career interests merged, provided the basis for governance. Contrary to the more common arguments characterizing political patronage as merely politics of blatant economic nepotism, these networks have provided coherence to the political process. Although lower-level networks could obstruct regime policies and system goals, the strong central government was organizationally capable of countering many of those elements, pressuring resistant networks, and appointing new and presumably more reliable replacements. Traditional Soviet political norms helped top national leaders to grapple with the challenges of subordinate networks while enabling them to consolidate their hold on the political process by developing their own clientele.

In certain fundamental ways, this traditional Soviet setting is not unlike that of other political systems. Political development brought with it the modern bureaucracy, which has continued to grow in size and complexity for at least a century. A major challenge before modern political leadership is to control and direct that apparatus, for such mastery is a primary prerequisite for governance. The building of coalitions, in part based upon patronage, but encompassing a diversity of interests and views, has been essential to that mastery in many societies. This has been especially true where there is a lack of organized independent interest groups or competing political parties. Where power is concentrated in a rigidly hierarchical decision-making system, and where there is no viable political opposition, the structural conditions for extra-legal patron–client relationships arise. A certain rationale and legitimacy for patronage networks emerges where explicit rules and norms forbidding such informal arrangements are lacking or poorly enforced. Patron–client networks come to constitute an informal system of checks and balances that permits groups of politicians to advance their interests. The distribution of power among contending groups restrains the hegemonic urges of any single group.

Patron–client relations also have helped politicians to govern in the traditional Soviet system. Coalitions of protégés and clients representing various interests and institutions have provided a

leader – a *patron* – with the support to develop and undertake a policy program. In national level politics, patronage ties enhanced the ability of the Communist Party General Secretary to consolidate power, to build a governing coalition, and to fashion a comprehensive policy program. Unlike many other political systems, in which newly elected leaders form new administrations of executive personnel, the traditional Soviet system required more informal mechanisms to permit a leader to form his own administration. The process of personnel turnover, elevation of trusted protégés, and building of alliances with major interests, was drawn out. Yet the successful completion of this process was vital to the long-term career and policy interests of all top decision makers, regardless of their levels of authority. The Soviet system gave leaders at both the national and subnational levels significant discretion and initiative within their own bailiwicks. But those leaders needed the cooperation of others to see a directive or program through to its implementation.

Gorbachevian reforms are transforming the Soviet system and altering the norms by which politicians advance and behave. The institutional and political reforms of the Gorbachev period are changing strategies of elite recruitment, coalition building, and regime formation. The hierarchical and centralized power structure of the Soviet system is giving way to a more decentralized, open, and democratic political process. An expanding range of actors and interests now influences the political process, and senior officials are less able to direct the country's political life. Moreover, informal interest associations and popular fronts are giving rise to formal interest groups and political parties that can legally compete for power with the CPSU. All of these changes contribute to a more formal separation of powers among political actors. As a result, a new rationale for career building may emerge; the politically ambitious may need new strategies to assure career success. Patron–client relations may take on a different relevance to the policy process of the 1990s.

This study of elite mobility, regime formation, and governance in the Brezhnev and Gorbachev periods considers patronage as an approach to understanding the Soviet political process. I examine coalition building at both the national and regional levels through an analysis of aggregate career data for over two thousand politicians. The study assesses the manner and extent to which leaders in politically stable and less stable settings – spanning different

national cultural contexts – have relied upon clientelistic networks to consolidate power and to govern. Analysis of Lithuanian and Azerbaidzhani republic politics confirms tendencies found at the national level. Examination of post-1985 Gorbachev period developments reveals a dynamic set of conditions that is changing the face of patronage in Soviet political reality.